



Recently, I asked followers on Twitter for books recommendations. The response was amazing. Fellow military leaders, journalists, academics, and even a Ukranian offered up suggestions. This guest post by Nathan Wike is a continuation of that conversation on Twitter. I encourage you to read Nathan's review of Rifleman Dodd and check out the entire conversation [here](#).

By: Nathan Wike

The Book

The book is short, only 151 pages, and pocket-sized. While this may not matter in the grand scheme of things, when packing space is at a premium it is nice to have a cargo-pocket sized book for long patrols outside the wire and short trips to the latrine. The book is a work of historical fiction, set in the Peninsular War during the Napoleonic Wars, eventually known to the French high command as the Spanish Ulcer. It was first published in 1932 by C.S. Forester, who is also the author of somewhat better known works such as [*The African Queen*](#) and the *Horatio Hornblower* Series. It is a well-researched and structured book, with the plot possessing a lively pace. In essence, this book is very entertaining and highly readable for anyone.

The Story

The story follows Matthew Dodd, a Sussex native and rifleman in the 95th (Rifle) Regiment of Foot. It is worth noting that at its inception the 95th regiment was itself unique in the British Army, stemming from its experiences in North America in the late 18th century. It was armed with rifles, wore dark green uniforms, and trained primarily as light infantry, scouts, and skirmishers. As the 95th screens the general withdrawal of the British Army, under the command of The Duke of Wellington, behind the Lines of Torres Vedras (known colloquially as The Lines), Dodd is separated from his unit. On the surface, the rest of the story revolves around Dodd's single-minded quest to accomplish one thing, rejoin his old unit. But other themes are present throughout the book, occurring in parallel as Dodd pursues his ultimate objective. Dodd's exploits provide insights for the soldier, the tactician, the operational artist, and even strategist.

The Soldier

At its lowest level, war subsumes and consumes individual men and women. This novella does justice to the life and death struggle of those fighting in Portugal during the Peninsular War. The ever present danger for the Portuguese is that their villages and isolated

farmsteads are discovered and subjected to the depredations of the French. Their men are executed as bandits/guerrillas in the most brutal ways, women and children are carried off to be raped and murdered regardless of age, and their very homes and communities are served death sentences as French formations requisition and ravage in search of sustenance.

Far from being a monolithic enemy however, the individual French soldiers are perhaps equally pathetic and unfortunate. Every day they face starvation. Every day their numbers dwindle from disease, malnutrition, and the heinous acts of violence perpetrated upon them by the native population. Overlaying this constant struggle is an almost palpable sense of frustration as the French soldiers question why they are fighting in such a backwards, desolate country, stagger futilely from one post to another and back again with no rhyme or reason, and wonder how anyone, let alone an army, could be expected to survive.

Throughout the novella however, one can only be impressed at the determination and ingenuity of the French as they struggle for survival, and how they continue to take the fight to the enemy in spite of the hardships. It goes without saying however, that the extreme circumstances coupled with the constant, brutal style of warfare have profound and lasting effects on the psyche of every character in the book

This contrasts sharply with the British soldiers, who emerge after spending the months covered in the story safely ensconced behind The Lines being well fed, well supplied, and untouched by the struggles going on outside. They make light of the haggard appearance of the wretches they encounter, and openly wonder how anyone could have survived in such a place.

This is the world Dodd is plunged into after being separated from the British Army. Every day is one where he wonders if he will be able to eat. When he does find food it is often the most unpalatable sort imaginable, such as a portion of raw liver taken from a dead cart horse. Every day is another where he risks capture and a brutal death as his continued

exploits infuriate the French. It is possible feel the fear and adrenaline as Dodd is pursued, and the intolerable agony and boredom of remaining motionless for hours as he seeks to avoid detection. Compounding his difficulties, he cannot read or write in his native tongue, nor can he speak or understand French, Spanish, or Portuguese and the frustration between him and his companions is obvious. Regardless, he intrinsically understands the value of killing French soldiers, and disrupting their operations whenever possible. Throughout the book he displays outstanding disciplined initiative, determination, and single-mindedness. His actions always serve the British tactical, operational, and strategic objectives on the Iberian Peninsula.

The Tactician

It is an aspect of guerrilla war that a small number of determined fighters can tie down many times their number. That the guerrillas can be everywhere and nowhere. That while their attacks may be insignificant by themselves, when they occur again and again and day after day they begin to take their toll. More by accident than design, Dodd finds himself the leader of Portuguese guerrillas at various points and his experience as a rifleman from the 95th makes him an ideal guerrilla. He carries a rifle which is effective well beyond the range of a smooth bore musket. His uniform is the camouflage of its day, he knows how to use cover and concealment, and he is an expert in utilizing basic movement techniques. Consciously and unconsciously Dodd trains his Portuguese allies in rudimentary guerrilla tactics, also imbuing them with the discipline necessary to continuously operate against a determined French enemy. With these attributes, and the timely exploitation of opportunities both he and his companions strike repeatedly with tremendous effect.

The French responses to these actions offer useful tactical lessons as well. Though under constant pressure, given enough time, they prove to be adaptable and ruthlessly efficient in waging a counter-guerrilla campaign. Their greatest successes, or near successes come when they engage in tactics similar to their adversaries. Dodd is almost killed several times

by mutually supporting small patrols or a lone sniper. Also they find success when the French bring their numerical superiority, relative advantages in equipment, and hardiness acquired from years of wartime experience to bear. They are able to seal off and totally clear relatively large areas, though at exorbitant costs. As fantastic as Dodd's story is, it is made all the more so by his luck in repeatedly avoiding death or capture.

The Operational Artist

The French are plagued by operational difficulties. The terrain is rocky and mountainous, the infrastructure primitive, and mission command is tenuous at best. Lines of communication are non-existent. The difficulties are well summarized by a passage in the book:

Not so much as a letter—far less a convoy—had reached the French since the time, three months back, when they had crossed the frontier...On the only occasion when they had been able to send news of themselves back to France the messenger had been escorted by 600 men who had had to fight every yard of the road and had left half their numbers by the wayside.

Forces smaller than a battalion risk being overwhelmed. It is only when they mass in large numbers that the French are relatively safe. However the Iberian Peninsula is described as a place where "small armies are defeated, and big armies starve." The French army not only starves, but it suffers for want of medicine and the evacuation of its sick and wounded. Additionally it cannot be provided with building materials, new equipment, fresh mounts and pack animals, or any of the sundry items needed to maintain an army of that era. No better off are the actual inhabitants of the country and their guerrilla fighters. Subjected to the foraging of the French, and the scorched earth tactics of the withdrawing allies, the Portuguese and Dodd experience their own difficulties in sustaining operations.

The British Army with its Portuguese allies, in contrast hold a strong defensive position with interior lines of communication, and possess naval superiority that enables them to be well supplied. When they finally sally out, it is in support of a broader strategic plan, with soldiers who are well prepared and extremely confident.

The Strategist

Though only briefly alluded to in the story, the larger political/strategic context may be easily inferred from the reading, and a rudimentary knowledge of history. When referenced it is stated that, though Dodd is too simple to understand it, the importance of the British hanging on on the Peninsula during the period covered in the book enabled the British government to weather a political crisis at home, and keep the country in the war. Hanging on also preserved the British Army's foothold on the European Continent, which was almost entirely dominated by Napoleon. Furthermore Dodd's ordeal occurs as the French Army is being reduced and exhausted all around him, by the conditions as much as by the enemy. Finally, Dodd's ordeal takes place immediately prior to Napoleon's ill-fated invasion of Russia, the commencement and ultimate failure of which would enable the European allies to assail the French Empire on all fronts.

Military strategy is where the French fail. Judging by their actions they are clearly not interested in winning any hearts or minds in Spain or Portugal. They do not attempt to administer, or govern the places visited in the book, nor do leaders even make a pretense of preventing their men from raping, murdering, and pillaging. Their single-minded drive to bring the British to battle causes them to overextend. They cling to their position on the peninsula until the effects of the campaign, coupled with logistical shortfalls make the position completely untenable. Worst of all the French surrender the initiative, and can only react to what the British and their guerrilla allies do.

The Duke of Wellington's military strategy however, is straightforward and well conceived.

He withdraws his armies to a practically impregnable position, while rendering the countryside inhospitable to the enemy. Using Britain's superiority at sea, he builds strength on land. Because of these, and their aforementioned difficulties, the French are unable to mount a concerted effort to force the British from the Iberian Peninsula. Finally, Wellington does not strike until the time is right, and his armies are ready.

Rifleman Dodd as a character exhibits many of the qualities one hopes to find in a soldier. In some ways, he exhibits the modern day warrior ethos. He serves as an example that is worthy of emulation, regardless of the time period. His drive and perseverance, and his dedication to duty are inspiring. *Rifleman Dodd* the novella however provides an excellent overview of the tactical, operational, and strategic issues at hand during the Peninsular War. The successes and failures of the combatants are worthy of examination, and serve as an excellent basis for further study. It contains many lessons for the military professional, and it is an fine addition to any military library.

[Nathan Wike](#) is an officer in the U.S. Army, and member of the [Military Writer's Guild](#). The opinions expressed are his alone, and do not reflect those of the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)

- [Pinterest](#)